



Dormant by [theowlandtheunicorn](#)

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Summary: Dustin has a new pet. Or: Steve can't catch a break, and Dustin doesn't learn from his mistakes.

1. Chapter 1

Knock knock.

The first instinct is to push deeper into the couch, away from the sound. But everything hurts, so he doesn't.

Knock knock knock.

He grasps for a pillow, puts it over his head, and several blank moments pass.

Knock knock knock knock knock knock knock –

Steve groans.

He glides down from the couch, squeezing his eyes shut at the onset of pounding pain combined with the knocking that feels like it's drilling a hole in his head. As the first shocks of movement pass, he proceeds to the entrance.

He opens the door to the icy air and a familiar grin, all bundled up between layers of woolen scarf and cap.

"Dustin?" Steve croaks.

"Steve!..." Dustin begins happily, then he grimaces. "Shit." He takes in the figure standing in front of him, his gaze settling somewhere around the top of Steve's head. "Are you out of hairspray? Is that why you've been missing school?"

"I'm sick, asshole." It's more words than he's said in days, and each of them hurts. "How do you know I've been missing school?"

"Nancy told Mike."

Nancy, his mind goes.

Nancy noticed he wasn't there.

She's been worried about him?

She hasn't called.

Maybe she's afraid it might give him the wrong idea, and doesn't want to hurt his feelings. She could have called if she wanted to, he would have been totally fine –

"... and we figured you were sick, but we were still kind of worried so I thought I'd come over and see what's wrong."

A warmth that has nothing to do with fever mingles with the frustration at having to stand upright and talk. Steve smiles.

"Aw, thanks, man. But you could've just called, you didn't have to bike all the way over here in the cold."

"You know, I was going to," Dustin begins, "but then I thought – no. Steve is my friend. When my friend Steve is sick, he deserves my undivided care and attention. Nothing can stop me from helping my friend Steve. Neither snow, nor rain, nor the blistering gloom of Indiana winter –"

"Alright, what do you need?" Steve sighs, rubbing his eyes. He longs to go back to the couch, lie down and never get up again.

"What?"

"Is it coins for the arcade? Is that why you're here?"

Dustin gasps.

"You think I came over to get something from you? I am hurt, Steve," he says, placing a hand over his heart. "Seriously, I just wanted to check if everything's okay. Plus your parents aren't home so you need someone to look after you."

"How do you know my parents aren't home?"

He shrugs. "They're never home. That's what Nancy said."

"Okay, Nancy needs to mind her own business, and you need to leave because you'll get sick –"

"She's just worried about you, now are you gonna move already?" Dustin says, talking over him. "It's freezing out here, want me to get sick too?"

"Yeah, how about don't come in then? There's a bunch of germs inside."

"I can't take care of you from the outside, Steve."

Dustin pushes past him and proceeds through the hallway, taking off his jacket but swinging the backpack right onto his shoulders again. After some brief processing, Steve goes after him.

"You think I need a thirteen-year-old nurse taking care of me?" he calls to Dustin's retreating form. "I'm fine," he says, voice breaking. "I'm totally –"

A coughing fit doubles him over.

Dustin turns around and approaches him. "Sure you are, buddy." He pats him on the shoulder. "Where's your teapot?"

Clutching at his chest, Steve gestures towards the kitchen and Dustin leaves in that direction. When he manages to follow, he finds the kid still standing at the door, apparently in shock and not venturing inside. It takes him a few moments to realize the reason.

Steve has always thought his family had too many dishes, and at this moment, every single one of them is dirty and resting in the big double sink, comprising a mound high enough to reach the wall cabinets. It's almost impressive, on one hand, Steve thinks, feeling his cheeks burn with embarrassment. It's got to be some kind of record.

"I'll, uh, wash these," he mumbles, scratching the back of his neck.

"No, you're not doing anything," Dustin says. "Go lie down, I'll make the tea. Go." He shoos him away. "I'll manage."

Teetering between not knowing whether this is actually happening and what's going to happen next, Steve walks to his living room in a stupor and falls back on the couch. He puts both hands over his pounding head and massages it, but the ache seems to increase by the

minute.

Through waves of pain, he can hear Dustin rummaging through the kitchen, saying things like "How can you not have any tea? Tea is *the* shit when you're sick – chamomile, okay, here's chamomile. Chamomile's good, but you want thyme," and "Your fridge is like completely empty. How are you even alive?" and the wonderful "I brought some of mom's chicken soup, I'll heat it up after the tea is done." After several barely conscious moments, he hears the kid return from the kitchen and feels him sit next to his feet.

"The tea is almost ready," he says. "You okay?"

Feeling like his head might explode, Steve nods into the pillow.

"So where are your folks?"

"At our place in Pennsylvania," he mutters. It's another half-hearted attempt to save their marriage by spending time in an empty and expensive house, and Steve finds that he doesn't really care anymore. At least not today.

"Oh," Dustin says. Then, "When are they coming back?"

"Dunno. Next week, I guess."

Dustin says nothing.

"This house is pretty huge," he says after a while. "Do you have any rooms you don't use?"

Steve turns on his back, wincing. The room turns together with him, and keeps turning.

"Yeah, some spare guest rooms. Why?"

Dustin shrugs, his eyes traveling the walls and the ceiling.

"Just making conversation."

Steve stares at him.

"You're acting weird."

"I'm always weird. That's a part of my charm." He grins.

Steve is just about to respond, when a sudden movement behind Dustin makes him jump.

"Whoa – what was that?"

"What was what?" Dustin asks. His face is a portrait of innocence, but in one brief moment, Steve is sure he saw a flicker of panic.

"Your backpack moved."

"No it didn't," he says.

"Dustin, I just saw it move –"

"Shhhh, you're hallucinating because of the fever." He procures a thermometer from somewhere and sticks it into Steve's mouth.

Steve spits it out. "I am *not* hallucinating, now you better tell me what's going on or I'll -"

Dustin puts a hand over Steve's forehead.

"Dude, I'm serious, you're burning up," he says, and looks worried. "I think your temperature's pretty high. How are you feeling?"

Steve winces; the consequences of sudden movement start catching up.

"My head hurts. And my throat." He rubs his eyes. "Honestly, I feel like shit."

"How about you take the temperature and I'll go get the tea."

Steve lies back down, gingerly placing his head on the pillow. He feels like he's just forgotten about something important, but his brain is too warm and heavy and remembering becomes too difficult. He puts the thermometer into his mouth and closes his eyes.

He wakes up, as the thermometer is removed, to a world of pain.

"Son of a bitch. Okay, take this. This'll help."

Somehow, a bit of water makes its way down his throat, and something that feels like a pill of some sort.

He sleeps.

2. Chapter 2

The first thing he becomes aware of is the absence of pain, and the curious sensation of floating, like being cushioned inside a fluffy cloud. His head feels fuzzier than before, but it doesn't seem to hurt, and for several moments he revels in the feeling, not daring to move.

Unfortunately, too soon, a weird little noise from across the room makes his eyes shoot open.

"Hey, buddy," Dustin says gently from a chair across the couch, lowering the comic book he's been reading. "Feeling any better?"

Steve gets up into the sitting position, wincing, and his head pounds just a little, vaguely and as if from a long way away.

"Yeah, actually." He rubs his eyes. "What time is it?"

"Seven o'clock. You slept for *three hours*. Good thing I brought entertainment." Dustin taps the small pile of books and comics on the table next to him. "Seriously, for rich people's home, this place is super boring."

"Tell me about it. You mentioned something about chicken soup...?"

"Yeah, it's in the kitchen," he says, as Steve proceeds towards it, "though it's probably cold by now."

"I really don't care, I'm so hungry I could eat a –"

At the kitchen door, Steve stops in his tracks. For a few moments, he simply stares, unsure if he's dreaming or really hallucinating this time. He walks back to the living room and looks at Dustin until the kid raises his head.

"What did you with the pile of dishes?"

"I washed them," Dustin says matter-of-factly.

"You... washed them," Steve repeats.

Dustin nods.

"You washed that entire thing," he says again, vaguely aware that he's repeating himself, but his brain feels too hazy for this kind of life change to register.

"Yep."

Steve blinks.

"You actually *washed all of those* –"

"No, I hosted a yard sale while you were sleeping and sold them. Yes I washed them, what do you think I did? They're in the cupboards."

"Jesus," Steve mutters.

He sits down on the couch, feeling his eyes burn. It's this stupid illness, making him all mushy –

Crack.

Steve jumps. Something that sounds like a tiny firecracker going off comes from the floor where Dustin's backpack is lying. It twitches several times, making that noise again, and then it stops.

"Okay – I saw that, and I am not hallucinating," Steve says, as Dustin opens his mouth. "Spill. What's in it?"

Dustin scrambles for the backpack and places it on his lap, putting a hand over it protectively.

"It's nothing, okay?"

"It's not nothing, nothing doesn't jump around and make weird noises!" Steve yells. "Now what the hell is going on?"

Dustin looks panicked for a few moments, then he heaves a great, huffy sigh.

"Son of a bitch. I was gonna wait for the right moment, but seeing as you just *won't let things go*," he says, glaring, "guess I'll tell you now.

But..." He sighs again. "Okay, it's a huge secret and I need you to promise you won't tell anyone."

"Fine, whatever. I promise."

Dustin shakes his head. "Not good enough. Swear on something you love. Swear on your hair."

"Dustin, if you don't tell me right now, I swear to God –"

"Alright, alright. But you promised, okay? Means you can never ever tell, no matter what."

"Fine, I won't," Steve says, and sits back down. "Jesus, what's with all the secrecy?"

"None of the guys know about this. Nobody knows." Dustin opens his backpack and carefully reaches inside.

Steve doesn't know what he's been expecting, but it's definitely not what he sees. An oval object of some sort comes out, like a smooth, dirty white rock a bit smaller than a basketball. Dustin places it on the table, not before making a sort of nest for it out of the backpack so it could stand upright.

Steve gets up from the couch and sits on a chair next to Dustin.

"What the hell...?"

"It's an egg," Dustin says, beaming.

Steve lowers his head closer to it, examining the faded patches of green on the surface that look as if someone took watercolors and made a few random splashes. He places a tip of his finger on one of the thin fissures shooting from the top downwards.

"Where did you get this?" he asks.

"I found it in the woods when I was returning from Mike's one day."

"And you just... took it."

"I didn't take it right away," Dustin says defensively. "I thought the mom or the dad might come back for it, so I left it. But they didn't, Steve, it just sat there in the leaves for days all by itself, and it's so cold, I didn't want it to die. So I brought it home. I made a nest for it out of some old clothes and put it under this lamp. I thought it was dead already 'cause nothing was happening for like a week, but yesterday it started making these cracking noises, and see this?" He points at the fracture nexus on the top of the egg. "I think it's about to hatch," he says with excitement.

As if to confirm his prediction, the egg does a small jump. Another tiny crack appears.

"Okay, you need to get this thing out of here," Steve says.

"Where am I gonna take it, Steve? I can't take it back home. If it's a bird I don't want Tews to eat it, and if it's like a lizard or something..."

"... You don't want it to eat Tews," Steve finishes. He puts a hand over his forehead and sighs.

Dustin shrugs, looking down.

"Mom's really attached to her," he mumbles. "After Mews..." He trails off.

Steve puts another hand over his forehead. "What do you think it's going to be anyway?" he says resignedly.

"No idea. I looked it up in some library books, but I couldn't find anything similar. Like it's really big, most birds' eggs are much smaller."

"What about a bald eagle?"

"Size of a tennis ball."

Through the haze in his head, Steve tries to remember the more dangerous possibilities of Indiana wildlife they've learned in school about.

"Are there like... alligators here?"

"I'm not sure," Dustin says. "I don't think so. In any case, their eggs get kind of squishy when they're about to hatch, this one's still rock hard. It doesn't look like any lizard or snake egg I found in the books either. Which means... new species," he says, grinning.

Steve sighs again as Dustin strokes the egg lovingly.

As if it's been waiting for that cue all along, something that looks like a wisp of smoke starts coming out of the cracks on the top.

Frowning, Steve glances at Dustin. He may not have paid attention to most of his Biology classes, but do eggs normally do this...?

Dustin's expression tells him they don't.

The egg starts vibrating on the table, and small bits of the upper shell start falling away like rubble. The smoke intensifies, and after a few seconds, the whole thing crumbles as a lizard type of thing jumps out.

It looks like nothing Steve has ever seen before. It's the size of a young cat and mostly covered in slime, with its back all wrinkly and crumpled and a long, slim, alligator-like tail at the end. Under the slime, it appears to be dirty white in color, with uneven, vaguely green patches all over its body.

Expecting to find a mirrored expression of disgust on Dustin's face, Steve looks at him.

The kid's face looks as if Christmas has come early, and he's just heard he's getting all his birthday presents at the same time.

Steve looks back at the creature. It opens its eyes, and they are big and somehow beautiful, a dazzling pale green of first life in spring. It looks up at them and blinks, then it shakes off like a wet dog, causing some of the slime to splatter on the kitchen table.

As it does this, Steve realizes it isn't its body that's crumpled after all. It's something else.

Stemming from just behind its head, pressed into its back like those of a newly transformed butterfly, there are two translucent wings.

Slowly, hesitantly, as if it's just realized they're there, the creature spreads them.

"Uh," Steve begins. "This isn't, like, a..." He stops. Because of course it isn't. It's stupid to even think –

"Yes," Dustin says in awe. "It is."

The creature blinks at them, as if confused itself, then gives a tentative flap with its wings.

"No," Steve says weakly, the air from the motion blowing his hair from his face. "It isn't."

Blinking rapidly, the creature lowers its head and opens its mouth. From somewhere behind the tiny, needle-like teeth, in the dark red depths of its throat, a glowing flame rolls forth. They both jump, overturning their chairs as the fire shoots between them and towards the ceiling. It fades away before reaching it, leaving a huge black mark in the corner.

For a moment, except for the sound of heavy, terrified breathing, everything is silent.

Dustin is the first one to speak.

"You were saying?"

A/N: Please let me know what you think! :D

3. Chapter 3

It's Dustin's storm cellar all over again. It's the junkyard, and that bus, and those dark, poisonous tunnels with death written all over them, and all of the nightmares afterwards. All hell is breaking loose, and Steve knows he can't do this again –

"Man, this is the awesomest thing *ever*! He is so cute! What are we going to name him?"

Steve tears his eyes from the creature at the table and looks at Dustin.

"We are not naming it – you're crazy! We have to kill it before it hurts someone!"

Dustin looks outraged.

"*You're* crazy, what's the matter with you? You can't kill him, it's a dragon! A DRAGON, Steve!"

"Yeah, a monster –"

"So? That doesn't mean he doesn't deserve to live –"

"Shit, what – what about us? Do we deserve to live? Because I'm sure you'll remember this moment right before it burns us to a crisp!"

Dustin scoffs. "He's not gonna burn us to a crisp."

"Did you not see what it just did?!" Steve yells, arms flailing. "Did you somehow miss the freaking *ball of fire* that almost blew a hole in my ceiling?"

"No, but if you'd just *calm down*, you'd realize that he's just a baby, and if we –"

"Yeah, and Dart was just a baby, before he grew up to become hundreds of bloodthirsty monsters who killed people!"

Dustin looks down, a hurt expression on his face, and Steve feels a twinge of guilt. All the while, the creature is sitting on the table, on

the mess that is Dustin's ruined backpack, switching its gaze between the two of them with mild interest.

"This won't be like Dart," Dustin mumbles.

"How do you know?!"

"I just know, okay?"

"*You just* –"

Steve clamps his mouth shut. He forces himself to take a deep breath. He takes a step towards Dustin and puts his hands on his shoulders.

"Dustin," he begins, with a kind of gentle urgency, "this is a monster. Okay? A monster. We can't have monsters from the Upside Down running around again, okay, we can't do this again –"

"Maybe he's not from the Upside Down," Dustin says quietly.

"Shit, where else –" Steve begins and throws his hands up, his voice losing all gentleness. "It wasn't misplaced by the local pet store!"

"No, I mean..." Dustin shrugs and looks down.

He gazes at the creature on the table for several seconds, then looks back at Steve. His eyes are very bright.

"... Maybe he's a real dragon from our world."

"Oh come on!" Steve yells.

"He could be!" Dustin yells back.

Steve puts his hands over his forehead.

"Jesus. Look," he begins, voice trembling. "I don't know if like, all these monsters being real is your dream come true or something, or all that Dungeons and Dragons has finally addled your brain, but just read my lips: dragons don't exist in our world."

Dustin crosses his arms.

"Prove it," he says.

"*What?*"

"Prove to me they don't exist!"

Steve splutters, because *what kind of a stupid thing is that to ask –*

"You can't, can you?" Dustin asks, gloating.

"Of course I – they just – everyone knows – they–"

Dustin looks more and more victorious.

"Well you can't prove they *exist*, either!"

"Uh, HELLO?" Dustin motions to the creature on the table. It follows the movement of his arms with apparent curiosity, then makes a tiny chirping sound.

Steve stares at it for a moment, then he looks back at Dustin. He opens his mouth again, but nothing comes out. He blinks. There has to be at least some trace of sense somewhere in that curly head for him to appeal to, he thinks wildly, but words fail him. He sits on the couch and covers his face with his hands.

"Okay. Okay," he says, on the verge of hyperventilating. "I can't talk to you. You're crazy. You're crazy, and, and I... I need to talk to someone who's not you. Someone not crazy. I need to call Hopper."

"What? You promised you won't tell anyone!"

Steve raises his head. "I didn't know what I was promising! I didn't know you had a dragon in your backpack, you can't hold me to it –"

"You *promised*," Dustin says, unshed tears coloring his tone. "I thought I could trust you. I thought you were my friend!"

"Of course I am," Steve says helplessly. "This doesn't mean I'm not your –"

"No! Friends don't lie! And they sure as hell don't break promises!"

On the table, the creature gives a strange little noise. Steve jumps, then gets up.

"Dustin... just listen to me," he pleads. "This is a *monster*. What do you think can happen, we'll set it free in the woods? What the hell do you think we can do with it?"

Dustin looks down and shuffles his feet.

"I thought..." he begins, and mumbles the rest of the sentence.

"What?"

"I thought... You know, before he hatched..." He gives Steve a hopeful look. "I thought that maybe we could keep it here."

Steve starts to laugh.

For several moments, he's sure that's the most hilarious thing he's heard in weeks... but Dustin keeps gazing at him, and Steve hears the sound of his laughter grow increasingly hysterical.

"You're serious," he gasps out after a while, half laughing and half coughing. "God, you're *actually serious* –"

"You said yourself you have all these rooms you don't use!" Dustin exclaims, clearly indicating it is Steve's own fault this thought even occurred to him. "And your house would be so much cooler! Just think about it, you could be like all those rich people who keep peacocks – only instead of peacocks, it's a dragon, which is a billion times cooler –"

Steve falls back onto the couch and covers his face, gripping the roots of his hair.

"I can't believe what's happening to me," he moans, and he can almost feel the insanity creep at the edges of his mind, pulling at the minuscule amount of peace that tentatively settled there after Halloween, when suddenly, his hands drop. "Shit, is that why you're even here? Is that why you did all those things, washed the dishes and shit – just to butter me up, to try and guilt me into saying yes?"

"No, okay?" Dustin cries. "I'm here because you're my friend and you're sick. I swear. And I would've done all that stuff for you anyway. I just thought... If you saw what an awesome friend I am... you'd want to be equally awesome and do me this small favor."

"Small f-" Steve stands up. "Washing the dishes for someone who's sick is not the same as asking someone to hide a dragon in their house! *Shit!* What am I saying? Why am I even discussing this with you? I – I need to –"

"No, wait, Steve, please," Dustin says frantically. "Come on, just look at him. He's so small. We have to –"

"– kill it!"

"– *take care of him!*"

"Oh, I'll take care of him," he says, his mind suddenly clear. "I'll take care of him with the bat."

He bolts up the stairs, followed by: "Steve, if you hurt him, I'll never forgive you!"

He reaches his room in seconds. Once inside, he throws himself on the floor and grabs the nail-studded bat from under the bed, and the firm, familiar grip makes some of the fear a little bit more bearable. But then he realizes he's left Dustin alone with the monster, and his heart starts pounding like it's about to explode. Steve runs out of the room.

He stumbles down the stairs even faster than he went up, and *god* if something's happened he'll never forgive himself, but surely, *surely* the kid isn't so crazy as to –

What he sees in the living room makes his heart skip a beat.

A/N: Please let me know what you think so far!

4. Chapter 4

Dustin is holding the creature in his arms, laughing as it stretches its neck up to sniff at his face.

For several moments, Steve is frozen to the spot. He barely dares to breathe, certain that one wrong move could mean the difference between fire and life.

He takes a step forward.

"Put it down," he says, with calmness he doesn't feel.

The creature whirls its head. Dustin grips it closer.

"You put the bat down first," he says.

Two pairs of eyes gaze at Steve, one defiant, and the other one strangely blank, green, wondering. He becomes very aware of the fact that if it decides to breathe fire right now, the flame will most probably reach him, and that will be the end.

Somehow, the creature's mouth stays closed. For now.

Steve inhales and takes another step forward.

"Put it down," he repeats, his voice shaking only barely.

"No!"

Closing his eyes, trying to keep the bat as inconspicuous as possible, Steve takes a few more steps towards them.

"Dustin, for the last time," he breathes. "Put that thing down –"

"No, you'll hurt him!"

Several things happen at the same time. Dustin squeezes the creature close to his chest, causing it to squeak and wiggle away from his grasp. It spreads its translucent wings and flies a couple of feet above them, then lands on the floor to Steve's left.

Slowly, Steve turns until he's facing the creature directly. His heart starts pounding hard, and fear starts climbing up his burning throat, and he can hear Dustin screaming something through the white hot buzz in his ears. Everything seems to slow down around him. He takes a deep breath, and, his entire body shaking, raises the bat...

From the floor, the creature looks at him.

Its eyes are huge and green, its pupils gazing directly into his.

Moments trickle by like sand... stretching into what feels like eternity.

And Steve realizes something.

(How come there's no fire?)

No matter how many times he's fought the Demogorgon and the Demodogs, his body acting out of pure fear and instinct to save others and himself from being devoured...

(Why isn't it defending itself?)

... he has never...

(Why is it just)

... actually...

(staring at me?)

... killed something with eyes before.

The bat clatters to the floor.

The dragon looks at it curiously, then back up at Steve.

Shaking, Steve sags to the floor.

Time seems to pick up again, and the noise in his ears dwindles to a faint ringing.

From Dustin's end, there's a relieved sigh.

"For a moment there I thought you were really going to do it," he murmurs, and sniffles.

Steve looks at him, but says nothing.

Dustin walks over and picks the creature up. It snuggles into his arms, those impossibly green eyes still wide, still soft and curious as if it was never under any threat at all.

"He needs to have a name," Dustin coos, wiping his eyes. "We need to find a name for you." He pets the dragon's head gently, and it leans into his touch.

"How do you know it's a he?" Steve says weakly, still on the floor.

"Oh. I guess I don't, exactly." He seems to think. "Well, we can think of both male and female dragon names, and then, when we see which ones we like best –"

"Dustin," Steve says.

The kid gives him a guilty look. For a moment they just stare at each other, and Steve tries to communicate something helpless with his eyes because words have failed him, but he has no idea what he's even trying to say.

Because what *can* he say?

The doorbell makes them both jump.

Dustin places the dragon on the couch and scrambles to the window. He peeks through the curtains.

"Shit," he says. "That's my mom. *Shit!*"

"Your mom," Steve gasps, and his heart starts pounding like crazy again. "Your mom's here?"

They look at each other in horror for a minute, not moving, as if the lack of movement could make the situation go away somehow.

The doorbell rings again.

"Oh my god oh my god oh my god," Dustin begins, walking up and down and clutching his head. "What are we going to do?"

Steve swallows. He tries to think, but he can't seem to get his brain to work, and nothing comes to mind except for what seems, at the same time, like the most logical and most insane thing they could do.

"... Let's just open the door."

Dustin looks at him for a few moments, then nods. He gives Steve a hand up, which is good, because his legs feel like jelly and he has no idea how he'd get up otherwise.

They walk towards the door, and as he reaches for the handle, Steve half expects something horrible to happen.

Mrs. Henderson's gentle smile has never looked so out of place.

"Hi, mom," Dustin squeaks.

"Good evening, Mrs. Henderson."

"Hi, boys," she says kindly. "How are you feeling, sweetie?"

"Oh, I'm fine," Steve says with what he hopes sounds like assurance, sweating, "just a bit of a sore throat –"

Dustin gives him a light kick in the shin.

"Steve is actually really sick, mom," he says. "He had a fever and everything. So I've decided to stay and take care of him."

There's relief, until –

"Not a chance, Dusty, it's a school night."

"But *mom* –"

"Absolutely not."

The whole scene seems surreal. The brief relief he's felt has disappeared, but nothing has replaced it yet, and Steve feels as if he's floating above them all, gazing down at a boy arguing with his

mother and a guy who looks like death warmed up and whose knees are shaking so bad it's a miracle he doesn't fall.

"Mom, you don't understand –"

"I won't hear another word," Mrs. Henderson says. Then she smiles. "Well, come on, go pack," she tells Steve.

"What?"

"You didn't think we'd let you stay here all alone while you're sick, did you? You're coming with us –"

"NO!" they yell.

Mrs. Henderson gives a start. She looks at them both in shock, then zeroes in on her son.

"Dusty!" she begins sternly. "I'm surprised at you. Stevie is your friend! He is ill, and he needs our care and attention to –"

"No, Mrs. Henderson – really, I – I'm fine," he interjects, bringing his hands up.

She looks at him in clear disbelief and he realizes his voice is too hoarse to be convincing, so he tries to clear his throat, which only makes it worse.

"It sounds worse than it actually is," he croaks. "Really. Dustin just... uh... wanted to use the opportunity to teach me about Dungeons and Dragons."

Mrs. Henderson rolls her eyes fondly.

"Those boys and their silly games. You listen to them for five minutes and you almost believe dragons are real!"

"Hahahahaha!"

Dustin elbows Steve in the ribs, and Steve joins in the nervous laughter.

"In any case, Stevie, I won't hear of it. I've already laid out the spare bed for you. You can spend the entire day reading comic books while Dusty's at school tomorrow, and I'll make us a nice lunch. What do you say?"

"Uh..." Steve opens his mouth hopefully, the smell of Mrs. Henderson's untasted chicken soup fresh in his senses.

Then he remembers there's a dragon in his house.

"... Thank you for offering, Mrs. Henderson," he says, trying to keep the regret out of his voice. "Seriously, that's really, really kind of you. But... I just wanna sleep in my own bed, if that's okay. Really, don't worry about me. I feel great."

He forces his mouth into a smile.

Mrs. Henderson makes a tutting sound.

"I don't like this one bit," she says disapprovingly, "but I guess I can't force you into the car." She gives a small shrug of disappointment. "If you change your mind at any time, all you need to do is call. I'll come and pick you right up."

"Thank you. Really, thank you for that."

She beams at him, then beckons to her son.

"Well, let's go, Dusty. Get your bike."

Dustin gives Steve a desperate look, but there's nothing Steve can think of that would make Mrs. Henderson let her son stay.

Dustin's expression grows more desperate.

"I'll call you," he says. "Just... remember what I told you. Uh... about the game. Not all dragons are bad, and we CAN'T hurt them –"

"Dusty, Stevie is tired, you two can play some other time."

They all walk to the car together, and Mrs. Henderson ushers her son in. Dustin's pleading gaze never leaves Steve's eyes.

"*You promised*," he mouths. Steve bites his lip.

"Take care of yourself, Stevie," Mrs. Henderson is saying as she turns on the ignition. "Go to bed early and remember to drink plenty of fluids. And don't forget, we're only a phone call away."

"I won't," he says. He smiles and waves.

They drive away, Dustin's worried face still visible until the car turns round a corner.

Steve stands there and smiles for several more moments. Then he bolts back inside, locks the door and runs to the living room.

It takes him half a second to realize that the dragon isn't there anymore.

"*Shit*."